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Invisible Cities

1. The city in the distance

Green-encircled, rising, it emerges
from banks of fog shrouding the dust
and scrub of that anonymous endless
plain we call our country.

It is not. Our country is the city
we have longed for, the city created
out of that longing: *hortus conclusus*
where every tree known to us flourishes,
a green density blossoming beyond all
ideas of beauty against that bluest sky.

In this city we can find the food
remembered from a time before
language, a potion for forgetfulness,
which, tasted, satisfies a desire
we never knew we harbored.

2. The desire for a city

It is not the desire of an old woman.
It is not the desire of a young woman.
Young, I wanted steppes, snowfields,
a plain undelved by the devices of man.
What calls me now—crone,
haggard wraith—is ocean:
the waves' spaces in water
where water is not. Only in night's
other universe, waking outside
myself, am I the woman who
once desired a city.

3. The city as mountain

In teeming rain I am climbing a hill so steep I barely manage to keep upright, keep moving, carrying bundles of wood, sticks, straw, packed bales that come from a country far from these cobblestoned streets. Alongside this path there's a construction site, massive buildings that seem skeletons of an unfinished monument. I see I'm lost, I don't recognize the names on street signs or the alphabet in which they're inscribed.

4. The city of past and present

The city contains its past in cobblestones paving old alleys that climb up from the river as if they were blind or drunk, mad to escape the water. In a tree that has grown around the iron fence of the present. In inscriptions not on parchment or bronze, but which, like lines on an ancient face, trouble the calm surface of the present: crazed hieroglyphs etching concrete, stone, steel.

5. The city of despair

If the stone turban of the grave marker could bow, weeping; if the arched branch of the aspen could shake its yellowing tears on the parched gravel beneath it; if the spike of the minaret could pierce the gray sky and bring down rain, perhaps a woman living in this city could stir, could shake off her torpor.

6. The city of old age

This city is capital of a different country—
time, accident, affliction—its borders marked
by a wide river I cross unaware
on the vessel which bears and
wrecks me.

The river carries me swiftly, insensibly;
I have left my home shore far behind
before realizing I am flotsam,
washing up on foreign rocks.

In the city of illness, suffering,
every morning I wish away the present.
In the city of health, all
I want is for the present to last.

The fortunate among us cross back again,
welcomed by the sands
of ordinary sorrow, transient ills: that green
space where affliction waxes and
waned, vanishes for a time.

Still we will return to the city
where affliction is the soil from which
each moment springs, the air we
gasp for, the shards of ice
wetting our parched lips.